

How to Use Herbal Supplements Safely and Effectively

By Curt Hagedorn

If America is waging a war on drugs, you couldn't tell it from our advertising. Whether it's on television, on the radio, in newspapers and magazines you can't avoid being bombarded with information about how to lift your mood, sink your allergies, enhance your sex life, get a good nights sleep and avoid embarrassment of just about every kind – always followed by the mandatory advice to “ask your doctor.” Unfortunately, however miraculous the effects of these modern marvels, they often come with side effects that vary from person to person, from mild nausea to, well, death.

Sprinkled among the advertisements for prescription drugs, you'll often see – particularly late at night – offers for vitamin and herbal supplements that make even more extravagant promises (and without having to get that pesky FDA approval like regular drugs.) If you've ever plunked down money for some “all natural” product “guaranteed” to increase your brain power, reduce your waistline or enlarge some part of your body, you've probably already realized that if these products could safely and effectively perform the miracles they claim, you'd be reading about them on the front page of your newspaper, not buying them at 3 in the morning from an 800 number on local television.

However, if you're overwhelmed by the hype, there are still any number of natural supplements and remedies that have stood the test of time both on our own shores and overseas, and you may find that even your family doctor is recommending things like vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements, diet and exercise, as well as therapies like acupuncture, meditation and massage for any number of ailments – things where the concentration is on overall wellness and well-being, maintaining good health rather than waiting for something to completely break down.

If you want to learn more about wellness in general, one of the best places you can go is your local health food store – they usually have not only a variety of healthy, often organic, food choices, but also a selection of supplements and normally a library of books and magazines where you can find out what particular traditional or natural remedies might be right for you. Books like “The Healing Foods,” or an up to date herb or vitamin “bible” or encyclopedia can inform you about what to eat or what to take to help a variety of common problems.

For example, for years people have used ginger, peppermint, fennel and cinnamon to help alleviate symptoms of indigestion – you can make an excellent digestive tea with just a piece of fresh peeled ginger, grated, and some boiling water – add some honey to sweeten it if you like. If you're an Agatha Christie fan, you'll notice time and time again that her famous detective Hercule Poirot prescribes an extract of valerian root – it has sort of a black walnut smell and is often used in artificial flavoring – to promote a good night's sleep and calm anxious nerves. You'll find any number of curative herbs mixed into Celestial Seasonings and other brands of tea – their Sleepytime mixture comes in both regular chamomile (another calming herb) and with Valerian. And of course, plants like Aloe, whose juices can heal cuts and scrapes, have become common additives in everyday products from dish soap to drinks.

Other more controversial herbs include St. John's Wort, for which there is some evidence that it helps alleviate anxiety and depression; Echinacea, which many people swear by as a general tonic and common cold preventative; and Ginseng, which has been used in Asia for years as an aphrodisiac. However, if you are planning on trying any of these less commonly used herbs, consult both your reference books and your doctor, as not only can herbs have side effects as dangerous as prescription drugs – including things like increasing or decreasing your heart rate and blood pressure – but can interact negatively with over the counter or prescription remedies you are already taking. Make sure you find out – and again, your health food store is more than likely to have a number of knowledgeable and friendly people willing to steer you in the right direction – exactly what you're taking and the correct dosage and usage before you take any herbal remedy.